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(*a*) Fighting in Close Country.
(*b*) Entrenching in the Present War.

Fighting in Close Country
and
Entrenching in the Present War

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West Yorkshire Regiment.
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[*Continued on page 3 of Cover*

GALE & POLDEN'S LECTURE SERIES, NO. 12

Fighting in Close Country

By

Colonel H. O'DONNELL, *p.s.c.*
West Yorkshire Regt.

Author of "Catechism on Field Training"

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Fighting in Close Country

The term " close " country may not be quite clear to all of you. It simply means country in which either view or movement, or, possibly, view and movement are restricted.

You must understand that country, which may be quite open to view and fire, if it be intersected by water courses, drains, or wire fences, etc., is really close from a military point of view, because troops cannot move freely over it.

On the other hand, woods with little undergrowth, though allowing movements of all arms through them, are close because they restrict the view.

THINGS WHICH RENDER COUNTRY CLOSE.

There are several different classes of things which impede the movement of troops or obstruct the view, and so render country close.

For instance:—

(a) There are things of the nature of wire fences or open drains, which give no cover from either view or fire, but which materially affect the free movement of troops across country.

(b) There are high and thick hedges, which give good cover from view, but which may give no real cover from fire, and which may be a serious obstacle to movement.

(c) There are banks, etc., which may give cover both from view and fire, but which form but a slight obstacle to movement.

(d) There are woods, which give cover from view and which may give also cover from fire, and which may or may not be a serious obstacle to movement.

(e) There are marshes and quicksands, which may be quite open but almost impassable.

You should be able clearly to recognise the value of these different classes of country, so that you can apply your knowledge to the best advantage.

CHANGES DUE TO SEASON OR CLIMATE.

Then again, you must remember that the nature of this country depends a good deal on the climatic conditions or the season of the year, etc., etc.

Remember that country, which in winter is open to view, may, in summer, be difficult to see over on account of the foliage of hedges or woods.

Cultivated land which in winter gives no cover at all, may, in summer, give plenty.

Ground which, in summer, gave plenty of cover, may, in autumn, give practically none.

Marshy ground, which, during most of the year, may be impassable, may in heavy frost be quite easily crossed by all arms.

Streams or drains may frequently be crossed when there is drought, or sometimes when the tide is out, though at other times they may be most difficult to cross.

INFLUENCE ON TACTICS.

The scope of **artillery** action in close country is often very seriously affected.

The *field of fire* may be considerably restricted on account of the difficulty of observation.

The *movement* is restricted by the nature and the extent of the obstacles to be met.

Cavalry action is affected in a precisely similar manner. Reconnaissance is difficult from the restriction of the field of view and movement from the nature of the obstacles.

In the same way the power of **aircraft** is greatly diminished in country which is closely wooded.

On the other hand, close country affords well-trained infantry many opportunities for successful action. Machine guns may often be effectively used, and surprises and ambushes are frequently easy to arrange. When time allows for thorough preparation, close country affords great opportunity for skilful defensive operations.

ADVANTAGES TO AN ATTACKER.

On the whole, close country, especially that which gives cover from view, is more advantageous to the attacker than to the defender.

Because, though deployment may be difficult, the same applies to the defence, but the defending force cannot tell where the main attack is coming from, nor can it usually see what outflanking movements are taking place. It usually happens that when the position is either turned, or the line of defence penetrated, the whole line gives way.

Local counter attacks by the defence are difficult to organise, and converging fire can seldom be made use of except after thorough preparation.

The attacker can approach with less loss than in open ground, and often he can mass his troops in the close vicinity of, though quite unseen by, the enemy.

He can screen his movements by the employment of small covering detachments, and his opportunities for effecting surprises are often very great.

DISADVANTAGES TO THE ATTACK.

There are, however, certain disadvantages. It is very difficult to exercise control over troops once committed to an attack across close country, formations dissolve very rapidly and action becomes almost individual.

The difficulty in keeping direction or touch, or of producing simultaneous action, is greatly increased. There is often a want of artillery covering fire or the effect of such fire is small.

HOW TO OVERCOME THESE DIFFICULTIES.

To avoid loss of direction, officers and non-commissioned officers should be given the general compass bearing of the attack, and all troops should be carefully trained in observation of physical signs. The position of the sun, the direction of the wind, or the situation of prominent objects in the landscape will materially assist men in their sense of direction.

In very close country, or in marshy land, etc., guides may frequently be employed with advantage, but great care must always be exercised in their employment, for treachery must be guarded against.

In country intersected by woods, high banks, or hedges, co-operation must be prepared for by the plentiful use of connecting files, which follow along the boundaries of fields on the flanks or in rear of each body of troops advancing.

The duty of these connecting files is to keep their commanders informed of the movements of neighbouring troops and of the development of the situation.

I want especially to draw your attention to this point, which is extremely important, viz.:—

Troops in action, if moving through the centre of a field (or other enclosure), should always have somebody moving along the boundaries, and when in repose somebody must be posted on those boundaries. In fact, it is better to move troops along the boundaries than in the centre of the open spaces. Even then somebody should be moving along the next boundary as a protective measure.

FORMATIONS IN WHICH TO MOVE.

Troops usually move across close country in formed bodies, covered by an extended line or by scouts, the flanks being strongly guarded by echelons and patrols.

When making a hedge-to-hedge advance the firing lines must take care not to bunch, especially in gaps, and it is usually better for each individual to make his own way through the hedge and to gradually collect in the outer ditch, than to crowd into narrow gaps and extend on the other side. Thin hedges or banks can be crossed by large numbers of men simultaneously.

Movements through gaps or across the open may be best covered by a flanking fire, directed at the junction of the hedges in the opposite corners of the fields, and an effective cross-fire may often be obtained in this manner.

Reorganization of units is of the greatest importance and should never be neglected by even the most subordinate officer.

(Here it is very necessary to show on the blackboard the various formations and the methods of providing flank protection, etc.)

THE DEFENCE IN CLOSE COUNTRY.

The defence in close country usually partakes of the nature of rearguard action, for a protracted defence is rarely possible, on account of the uneven advance of the attacker and the liability of the flanks to being turned.

The advantages of the attack are the disadvantages of the defence, but they can be minimised by careful preparation.

The foreground may be cleared so as to give a short zone of frontal fire, while providing for flanking and enfilade fire, especially that of artillery and machine guns.

Communications must be improved to afford freedom of movement.

Existing obstacles may be utilised or fresh ones made to bring the enemy under enfilade fire, or to confine his movements to directions which allow of effective fire being opened on him.

It is very necessary to occupy the corners of fields or enclosures, so as to bring enfilade fire to bear on an enemy advancing under cover of the fences and to prevent being outflanked.

Clearances should be made to allow of such enfilade fire being effective.

Flanks must be protected by echelons and patrols, especially at the junction of hedges, for a very few men occupying a flanking position may quickly turn a long line and render it untenable.

Communicating gaps for lateral communication should be cut a short distance in rear of the junction, so as to leave a part of the hedge, bank or wall as a traverse to the main line.

Perpendicular communicating gaps are best not placed at the extreme corners of the fields for similar reasons, but all gaps should be masked if time allows.

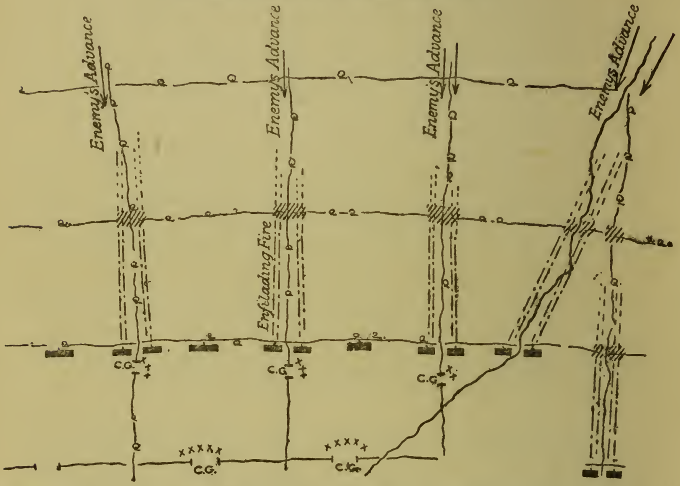
HOW TO DISCOVER THE DIRECTION OF THE ENEMY'S MAIN ATTACK.

The direction of the enemy's main attack may be obtained by throwing forward a screen to force him to deploy early, or the same effect may be obtained by making local counter attacks. The latter, however, is much more dangerous.

POSITIONS TO AVOID.

Commanding positions, or those affording points easily discernible from a distance, should be avoided, as they offer an objective for the enemy's fire and lessen the difficulties of loss of direction.

PLAN SHOWING OCCUPATION OF HEDGES, &c., IN ENCLOSED COUNTRY.



///// Clearances. . ⁻ C.G Communicating Gap. ×× Obstacles masking gap

Occupy corners of fences. Clear corners of fields in front. Entangle hedges where necessary. Cut communicating gaps.

Entrenching in the Present War

Entrenching in the Present War

I have been asked many times since the opening of the present war how the question of Field Entrenchments has been affected, and whether the teaching of our text books is not rendered comparatively obsolete by the nature of the hostilities.

My answer is most emphatically—No! The teaching of our text books is as sound as it ever was. It is the ignorance of the contents of books (which ought to be known to all), and the want of how to apply knowledge, that has given rise to such observations.

The Manual of Field Engineering should be read by all officers in connection with F.S.R. I., and a study of Chapters IV. and V. will give a good idea of the subject of Field Entrenchments, while Part II. of Military Engineering gives further details as regards siege operations.

NO INFALLIBLE RULES.

There are some people who do not read or study, but want a rule for everything—an infallible rule, which can be applied anywhere and everywhere to any situation which may arise. But this is an impossible thing in warfare. We can have no infallible rules in tactics; we have to apply common-sense to the situation of the moment, and the general principles of defensive action must be applied in entrenchments. We practise in war what we learn in peace.

TEXT BOOKS.

Our text books, you must remember, are very much condensed. They contain principles which have been gathered from past experiences of warfare in all countries and from soldiers of all nations. But there are few of these principles which could not be applied to the various situations which have arisen during this war. The text books, however, give few details. When they do give details they are most careful to explain that the details represent types only, and that the form of work constructed must be altered to suit the occasion.

HASTY ENTRENCHMENTS.

Field entrenchments usually partake of the nature of hasty entrenchments. When troops are on the move or expecting to come under fire, or are even under fire, the entrenchments constructed are of a very rough and hasty character. The soldier in the firing line can only make a shallow scraping, possibly affording but slight cover from view or fire. The party awaiting attack may improve a wall, a bank or a hedge to afford a little better concealment or protection. But neither can do much more, while the enemy is able to see them and fire at them.

THE PRESENT TRENCH WORK.

The elaborate system of trench work which we hear of now is not the hasty entrenchment of the battlefield. It began with the hasty entrenchment and the improvement of existing cover, and has gradually been extended and scientifically elaborated under cover of darkness into what is now almost semi-permanent fortification.

The nature of the trench work may best be gathered from what is shown on Plate 16, M.F.E.

There is not a thing which has been done, nor a principle which has been adopted, which is not allowed for in the text books, and which should be known to you all, if you had studied those books or the histories of past wars.

I cannot give more than the briefest of allusions in the present lecture, for the subject is a big one, and would require many lectures to thrash out thoroughly.

TRENCHES.

There are several distinct natures of trenches, designed for different purposes, which may be readily distinguished by their names. FIRE TRENCHES, as their name implies, are especially intended for men to fire from. COVER TRENCHES are primarily intended to afford cover, but they should always allow of being utilized to some extent as fire positions. COMMUNICATING TRENCHES, which connect the various portions of a defensive position, and give cover to the troops using them.

CONCEALMENT.

If you refer to the Text Book (M.F.E. §28 (2)), you will find that the greatest possible stress is laid on the value of concealment.

This is more than ever necessary now, when observation from aircraft has reached such a pitch of excellence.

Invisibility is frequently just as valuable as cover from fire, while a badly exposed or indifferently constructed trench may give a whole position away.

But even this concealment is a matter of consideration. You must regard the distance of the enemy and his likelihood of discovering the trench. At the present moment, when the main lines of trenches are within a stone's throw of each other, concealment of the parapet is of minor importance; what is of greater value is protection of the individual and obstacles to keep an approaching enemy under fire for a sufficiently long time.

PARAPETS.

So long as you can get a good field of fire, the parapet cannot be too low. Very often you can do without a parapet at all, but you have to consider very carefully as to whether your men's heads will show up unduly against the skyline or background. It is all a matter of common-sense.

If there is a chance of your trench being seen, make it as inconspicuous as possible, that is if you have a chance of doing so. If your main object is to get out of fire as quickly as you can, you must throw up a parapet which can be seen, because you can then get cover twice as quickly, and if you are quite close to the enemy it does not matter a rap; he must see your trench when day comes.

But if you are at some distance, and if you have time to work in, you can hide your trenches very effectively.

Leave natural things, which don't interfere with your line of fire, growing. Make your parapet as inconspicuous as you can, letting it assimilate with the ground in its immediate vicinity.

Don't make it a market garden or a flower show, but imitate the surroundings.

I have seen parapets planted with flowers at regular intervals, or with single ferns, or little branches, stuck in regularly at a yard apart. You may imagine how ridiculous this was. It did not make the parapet inconspicuous; the ferns, or flowers, or bushes did not grow like that in the vicinity. You might just as well have put up a big notice board—" Here's our trench!"

Remember flowers, ferns, branches, etc., quickly wither and change colour, and may give the show away, so be careful as to what you do, as well as how you do it, in the way of masking your parapets.

Then again, avoid skylines if you can, but if you have to use skyline positions, you may minimise the ill-effects by piling the earth behind you instead of in front, and so create a false skyline, which may afford the necessary concealment. But you must be careful in such a case to conceal that parapet just as carefully as you would the front one.

Always go out and have a look at the trenches from the front, from the enemy's point of view if you can, and see for yourself what is at fault.

A skyline position is more especially to be avoided when it forms a skyline to the enemy's artillery position, and so gives them a good target.

SITING A TRENCH.

The ideal site for a fire trench is one from which we can get the best possible fire effect, and, at the same time, the best concealment of the trench and of the supports, etc., which we may wish to put into that trench.

But, of course, ideal positions are not to be found, and we have usually to be content with a compromise between the various qualities we are looking for. Occasionally we have to occupy extraordinarily bad positions and make what we can of them.

What we most urgently require is a good, though not necessarily a long, field of fire. It is quite good enough if we can get a field of fire of 300 yards or 400 yards. We often have to do with less, and it may be quite a few yards only, but we have to make up for distance by the use of obstacles, so as to keep the enemy under our fire for a sufficiently long time. The longer the field of fire, however, the better the chance (in daytime at least) of inflicting loss.

You will find that in the course of the present war the trenches have in some cases approached within quite a few paces of each other. But that is the force of circumstances, and the situation is now practically that of siege warfare. When the trenches are so close, however, there are certain compensating advantages, for high explosive shell cannot be used, though, on the other hand, they may be blown in by mining or by bombs, etc., thrown from the opposite trench.

HIGH GROUND.

You must get out of your heads the idea that high ground necessarily indicates strong positions. Nothing is more dangerous. The advantages of high ground are often over-estimated. The advantages are that it gives better chances of observation, and may hide dispositions from the enemy, but since the advent of aircraft these advantages have greatly diminished, though still the advantage of cover from view of supports and reserves is great.

But, although you may occupy a position which includes commanding ground, you need not put your trenches along the crest lines. You can put your trenches further forward and use the high ground for your observation posts and artillery positions.

Trenches near the summit of rising ground are easy to supply and reinforce, but are harder to conceal than those placed further forward.

But it is not always necessary to make your trenches to fire downhill. They may get equally good fire positions on the flat or firing uphill. The great thing is to avoid too steep slopes.

In many instances in the present war a position retired some distance behind a crest line has been adopted. But a back position has dangers also in spite of advantages. The dead ground must always be observed, and should, if possible, be flanked by fire from other positions.

If trenches are placed far forward on the outer slope, difficulties occur in supply or in getting up reinforcements, and you must remember that at night flashlights, searchlights, etc., are constantly employed.

So we usually find it is best to have our fire trenches somewhere near the crest-lines of slightly undulating ground, or retired well behind the forward crest of steep crests, while dead ground is covered by flank fire from neighbouring trenches.

ADAPTING TRENCHES TO THE GROUND.

Every advantage must be taken of the ground itself to facilitate the construction of the trenches, and it is generally easier, therefore, to make them in quite short lengths following the contour of the ground.

ARTIFICES.

Dummy parapets, guns, etc., may be placed so as to draw the enemy's fire, and every artifice should be employed to mislead him as to the position of the real trenches or guns.

In the present war, among the maze of trenches at the front, some are constructed with a view to induce the enemy to enter them and bring himself under enfilade fire, etc.

DESIGN OF THE TRENCH.

It has been asserted that the design of the trenches at the front is different from that which troops have been taught to make. That may be so, but it is not different to the types of trenches which the text books show may be adopted under certain circumstances.

We are taught that the design of the trench depends on: the time and labour available, the soil, the site, the range and the description of fire which may be brought to bear on it. So it is entirely our own fault if we cannot construct a trench to suit the occasion. It is often imperative, on wet or rocky ground, to build up a parapet instead of sinking a trench. The parapet answers the same purpose, but is, of course, more conspicuous and more easily destroyed. It requires more work, as a parados or back protection is equally necessary, and the thickness of the parapet must be great. In many places our fire trenches and communicating trenches consist of built-up parapets.

There are, at the front, hundreds and hundreds of different types of trench, some of them admirably suited to the purpose, others not so well adapted, but all have gradually been improved so far as circumstances allow.

MACHINE GUNS.

The use of machine guns in the trenches can scarcely be over-estimated, but their concealment is imperative, as they always draw hostile artillery fire. They must have alternative positions and must constantly be changed. They should be placed so as to bring an oblique and cross fire across the whole front, or to enfilade various portions of the entrenched line which an enemy may have penetrated.

FUNCTIONS OF A TRENCH.

There are several functions which every fire trench should fulfil:—

(1) It should allow the garrison to use the rifle with full effect.

(2) It should give cover from fire, i.e., the parapet should be bullet-proof.

(3) It should be as inconspicuous as possible.

(4) The interior slope should be as steep as possible.

(5) It should be as narrow as we can make it, not so much on account of the cover from fire afforded, but because narrow trenches are harder to discover by aircraft.

(6) There must be cover from oblique and enfilade fire, and if there is danger of reverse fire from that as well.

(7) There should be arrangements for drainage and sanitation, as well as for cooking, feeding, and medical attendance, if prolonged occupation is anticipated.

(8) Steps must be made to allow the garrison to get quickly out of the trench to meet attacks with the bayonet, and due consideration of this is of the utmost importance.

(Here it is very necessary to give various types of fire trenches on the blackboard, explaining when they may be used and the advantages and disadvantages of each.)

LOOPHOLES.

Loopholes in earthen parapets are very difficult to make and may prove bullet traps. At very short ranges it is generally necessary to use them, but in such cases steel plates (articles of store) or similar materials are best employed. At longer ranges or when parapets have to be manned quickly, especially at night, it is preferable to use notches instead of loopholes. It is always necessary to test the loophole with a rifle when making it, and to slope off the parapet, if necessary, to obtain the best possible fire effect.

It is always necessary to blind or mask an unoccupied loophole, or prevent light showing through it.

(*Here it is necessary to show on the blackboard the various types of loophole. To draw attention to the dimensions*, *and to explain the construction of certain descriptions which may be used in trench work.*)

FLANK PROTECTION.

It was not at all uncommon to find that in the earlier stages of the trench warfare little or no flank protection had been arranged for. In some cases the enemy was able to get astride the fire trenches, and, with the use of his machine guns, to enfilade a long line.

Traverses are very necessary, or the trace of the trench must be wavy or zig-zagged, or the parapet may be recessed, but every effort must be made to minimise or localise the effect of oblique and enfilade fire.

COMMUNICATION TRENCHES.

Communication trenches are most important; they are usually zig-zagged back from the fire trenches to covered positions in rear. Every advantage must be taken of the natural features of the ground to facilitate their construction. They should always be made with a view to the possibility of occupying them for fire purposes, especially to meet flank attacks.

When trenches of this description are used to the front of the fire trench either for gaining ground for the opening of further advanced trenches or for listening patrols, etc., they become saps (open) or mines (underground), and the ensuing warfare is considered under the heading of "siege operations."

OVERHEAD COVER.

Overhead cover is very necessary when exposed to shell fire, grenades or bombs, but great care is required in its construction: (a) It should not curtail the number of rifles firing; (b) it must not weaken the parapet; (c) it should be easy to get in or out of; (d) it should not be liable to collapse easily.

PROTECTED LOOK-OUT.

Protected look-outs are very necessary, but they must not be readily recognised as such by the enemy. Reflecting mirrors may be usefully employed, or narrow loopholes giving an all-round view.

(*Here it is very necessary to give types of communication trenches and of overhead cover which may be employed, and to show how shelters may be used for purposes of fire.*)

Continued from page 2 of Cover.

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